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CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHIES

TWO AMHERST DICKINSONS

REV. AUSTIN DICKINSON, A.M.

REV. BAXTER DICKINSON, D.D.

By

AUSTIN BAXTER KEEP
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REV. BAXTER DICKINSON, D.D.

From a photograph



REV. AUSTIN DICKINSON, A.M.

From a miniature

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHIES: TWO AMHERST DICKINSONS

AUSTIN BAXTER KEEP

REV. AUSTIN DICKINSON, A.M.

“IF some future generation should ever conceive the idea of erecting a statue to commemorate the founder of Amherst College, the man most deserving the honor would be the Rev. Austin Dickinson.” So wrote in 1871 the Rev. Jacob Abbott, father of the Rev. Dr. Lyman Abbott, author of the once famous “Rollo” books, and a professor at Amherst in its early years, when called upon for his recollections of the institution when struggling for very existence in the most critical period of its history.

A partial explanation of any seeming neglect by the college authorities toward the memory and services of this forgotten—or, more exactly, little known—benefactor appears in the same letter as follows: “He had, however, no formal connection of any kind with the College, and so quiet and unostentatious was his action in all these proceedings, and so entirely was his interest in the work confined to a desire to have it accomplished, without any wish to secure to himself the honor or the consideration due to the one who was the means of accomplishing it, that I am not surprised to learn that his name does not appear upon the college records of those days.”

The “proceedings” above referred to were, so the same source tells us, “all action of a legal or political character connected with the efforts to obtain a charter for the College.” But before recounting the truly remarkable series of events that culminated in success under the influence of an unpretentious young clergyman, it were well to outline briefly his early life and circumstances.

Austin Dickinson was born in Amherst, February 15, 1791, in a house still standing on the easterly road in the northern part of the town, second of the four sons of Azariah and Mary Eastman Dickinson. Of a meditative temperament and trained in a home atmosphere of intelligence and piety, he early planned to become

a minister. His collegiate course was taken at Dartmouth, where he was graduated in 1813. Despite a frail constitution and frequent suffering from eye-strain, he maintained "a prominent place among the best scholars of his class." This from his roommate, who added: "There was no branch of study to which he was not fully adequate, but he excelled in languages and composition. He was a deep thinker and a strong original writer."

After graduation he read law for a while in an Amherst office and then spent several months in horseback travel for his health. After a course of study at Princeton Theological Seminary he was licensed to preach, but felt physically unable to accept a stated charge. Again he set forth on horseback, journeying toward the south, preaching by the way, and visiting colleges and seminaries without regard to denomination. "The great aim of his life," said one who knew him well, "was the elevation and salvation of humanity and the honor of his Divine Master"; and he concerned himself but little with sectarianism.

From his journal it appears that on this pilgrimage he declined several calls to a settled pastorate, but assisted in establishing schools, missionary societies and Bible and tract distributing centers, and in securing subscriptions to religious periodicals, of which there were then but few.

As evidence of his astonishing powers of organization, as well as his breadth of vision, it should be told how he raised by personal solicitation within less than nine months the sum of \$35,000 to found a theological seminary in eastern Tennessee. On this mission he rode through six adjoining states, bearing a letter of endorsement from General Jackson, later President, himself a generous contributor to the enterprise. Besides this he set in operation in Richmond a non-sectarian religious newspaper, *The Family Visitor*, the first of its kind south of Mason and Dixon's line.

Upon his return to Amherst, in June, 1822, he found another field of effort awaiting him. The "Collegiate Institution" had only just been started with the primal purpose of aiding indigent young men in preparation for the Christian ministry. There was immediate need of a fund of \$30,000 to insure its continuance, and to Mr. Dickinson the call to assist in this enterprise of enlightened piety proved irresistible. In the library of President Moore he drew up a subscription paper, and with the assistance of his

brother, the Rev. Baxter Dickinson, and others he soon raised one tenth of the sum in and around Amherst. The remainder he took a leading part in obtaining from outside sources within a year.

From the very beginning he had been deeply interested in the movement to establish a college in his native town; and his efforts to induce the acceptance of its presidency by Dr. Moore, then president of Williams College, in whose family he had lived when a student at Dartmouth, are attested in these personal words from Mrs. Moore: "If it had not been for your influence with my husband, we never should have been in Amherst."

And now a new and formidable task presented itself, namely, to secure for the College a charter in the face of an organized, virtually state-wide opposition, due chiefly to the evangelical character of the institution. First President Moore and Mr. Dickinson consulted their distinguished fellow-alumnus, the Hon. Daniel Webster, who had not long before made his memorable and successful plea in behalf of Dartmouth College against a hostile legislature, and were greatly heartened by his assurances that their cause was not only worthy but eminently just. Similar approval came from other prominent men.

At that time the leaders of the Federalist party, then in power, were openly opposed to the College and its appeal for a charter. As the state election approached, they nominated for governor Harrison Gray Otis, a wealthy Bostonian, while their opponents (then called Republicans) put up William T. Eustis, of Roxbury, their unsuccessful nominee of the year before. By personal inquiry Mr. Dickinson ascertained that Mr. Eustis, if elected, would favor the charter. He thereupon conceived the design of influencing numbers of Federalists to change their vote to the other party and actively set about its accomplishment by personal visits to men in all walks of life, ministers, professors, business men, and farmers, besides writing hundreds of letters and issuing appeals in the current press. The result was truly dramatic, as Mr. Eustis was elected by a decisive majority.

This was, however, but the beginning; a renewed application for the charter, though favorably reported by a joint committee of the legislature, was deferred for consideration till the next session. Hard upon this disappointment came a tragic set-back in the sudden death of President Moore. One incident will serve to reveal

the hostility manifested toward the College. An Andover professor in a conversation asking, "Can they get a successor?" was met with the harsh rejoinder from another eminent theologian, "The question is whether they *ought to have* a successor."

Here again the services of Mr. Dickinson were invoked, and he was entrusted by the authorities with the important and delicate mission of persuading the man of their choice, the Rev. Dr. Heman Humphrey, pastor of a large and united congregation in Pittsfield, to leave that advantageous station to become the head of a struggling young college, whose efforts to gain legal standing were at that very time vigorously resisted.

Once more success crowned his labors, and the acceptance of the office by Dr. Humphrey, no less than his able inaugural address, gained the College strong reënforcements. Nevertheless, despite all this and further personal efforts, the bill to grant the charter failed to pass early in 1824. Then came the reelection of Mr. Eustis as governor, and a new bill was introduced in May. This time the opposition, not feeling itself strong enough to risk a vote, secured the appointment of a joint committee to investigate actual conditions at Amherst.

In preparation for this visitation Mr. Dickinson was, if possible, more tireless than before, advising Trustees and Faculty and again faring forth with a subscription paper, this time for \$15,000, and again meeting with success. The committee spent a fortnight in a minute inspection of the whole situation and reported favorably; whereupon, though only after another prolonged and heated discussion, the legislature voted to grant the charter, in February, 1825.

In that same month Mr. Dickinson completed his thirty-fourth year. Says the Rev. Jacob Abbott again: "I think it was generally understood at Amherst, while the question of its legal establishment was pending, that he was the main and, indeed, almost the sole reliance of its friends for all the plans formed and the measures adopted to promote success." And from President Humphrey comes this further word: "Mr. Dickinson brought influences to bear upon the public mind which few men could have wielded with such skill and success, and for which the College is more indebted for its establishment and prosperity than one in a hundred of its present friends is or ever will be aware of."

Furthermore, as if that were not enough, Mr. Dickinson had for over a year of this time of strain and stress been "supplying" the pulpit of the First Congregational Church in Amherst (the present College Hall), and, in the words of Professor Abbott, who extolled his imagery and diction, "these services were looked forward to with great anticipation by the officers and students of the College and by the cultivated portion of the community." Another former member of the Faculty, the Rev. Solomon Peck, declared that "his power to move others was conspicuous in public address scarcely less than in private intercourse."

From Professor Abbott we have this as to his character: "I remember Mr. Dickinson as the most grave and austere man I ever knew, with no thought and no word of interest for anything light or trifling, but wholly engrossed at all times in his deep-laid plans and schemes for the advancement of the College." Professor Peck wrote long afterward of his personal appearance: "He was a man to make lasting impressions. His features and their habitual expression, sedate, earnest, sometimes bordering on sadness, but occasionally brightening into a smile; his deliberate, measured gait, with brow inclined, as if weighed down with momentous aims and plans; the directness but kindness of his appeals; and his prolific inventiveness, ever devising new methods of influencing the general mind for good,—all stand out before me at this hour as if I had seen him but yesterday."

Although here ends the story of his connection with Amherst College, it will not be amiss to review briefly his subsequent career, which was in keeping with the nature of his earlier activities. His next exertions were directed toward the improvement of the American pulpit, as he felt that its printed sermons were inferior to those of British divines. Accordingly he undertook the monthly publication of sermons by eminent living preachers of all denominations, calling the periodical *The National Preacher*. This wholly novel work, published in New York, within less than three years attained a circulation of twelve thousand and was continued with great usefulness for forty years. Mr. Dickinson remained its editor and proprietor for nearly thirteen years and personally distributed gratis a number of copies equal to the list of subscriptions. Throughout these years he also gave generously of his time and substantial income to all worthy objects, acting

for a while as editor of the American Tract Society, as well as preaching constantly on Sundays to some destitute congregation.

Then followed a voyage to England, partly for the benefit of his health, but chiefly to study the educational and benevolent institutions of Great Britain. On his return he devoted such time as his health would permit for the next six years to securing subscriptions for *The New York Observer*.

In 1844 he entered upon his last and most important enterprise, namely, to quote his words, the insertion of "interesting religious matter" into secular newspapers, there "to be read by millions who would never see a religious journal and many of whom would only despise a tract." That this project, in which he met with unqualified success, was not only original and revolutionary but beset with no little difficulty, is evident from his own further statement: "Previous to this undertaking, the editors of secular papers, generally, scarcely noticed religious movements or seemed to feel any interest in them. Much delicacy and prudence were, therefore, necessary in any attempt so to change their views and tastes that political journals might, without exciting prejudice, be made the heralds of sacred truth and religious instruction."

In furthering this work he was frequently seen, after midnight, mounting the stairs to some printing office, on a fourth or fifth floor perhaps, to read proof, as proof readers were very apt to make serious errors in religious articles. He was also often obliged to write nearly all night long to furnish an account of some important meeting to several morning papers simultaneously, since no editor would publish such items the second day after.

In the midst of disinterested toil he died at the home of his brother, Dr. Baxter Dickinson, during the cholera epidemic in New York, August 15, 1849. He was survived by his wife, formerly Miss Laura W. Camp of New Preston, Conn., a lady of superior intellectual gifts and culture. Their only child, a daughter, died in infancy. Of all the printed tributes to his memory the following sentence in *The American Messenger* of October, 1849, will suffice as an apt characterization: "He was a man of great singleness of purpose and of unyielding perseverance, fruitful in devising and laborious in executing plans of usefulness." And then after life's fitful fever he was laid to rest in the "old" cemetery in the town of Amherst on Pleasant Street, as the inscription on

the tall marble monument "erected by a few friends" testifies, "after a life of eminent Christian enterprise and usefulness."

REV. BAXTER DICKINSON, D.D.

Baxter Dickinson was born on April 14, 1795, in the town of Amherst, the youngest of the four sons of Azariah and Mary Eastman Dickinson, his brothers being named respectively Ransom, Austin, and Daniel. His father, a prosperous farmer, had enlisted as a minute man in the Revolutionary War upon news of the battle of Lexington.

At the age of sixteen he made profession of faith in Christ and, like his elder brother Austin, planned to enter the ministry. He was graduated from Yale College with honors in 1817 and from Andover Theological Seminary four years later as valedictorian of his class.

His first charge was at Longmeadow, now a part of Springfield, where he was ordained March 5, 1823. It was at this time that he rendered material assistance in raising funds for the young college at Amherst and from the first fruits of his slender salary made a personal contribution thereto, as the records show.

From 1829 to 1835 he was pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church in Newark, N. J., resigning to become professor of sacred rhetoric and pastoral theology at Lane Theological Seminary, Walnut Hills, Ohio. From 1839 to 1847 he held the same chair at Auburn Seminary, Auburn, N. Y., resigning that post to take an important office in the Foreign Evangelical Society, continuing the same work after its merger into the American and Foreign Christian Union. He at first took up his residence in New York, but after some years removed to Boston. During this period he also gave instruction in Andover Seminary.

From 1859 to 1868 Dr. Dickinson conducted with his four daughters a school for young ladies in Lake Forest, Ill., with notable success. His declining years he passed in Brooklyn, N. Y., where he died December 7, 1875, at the age of eighty. He was survived by his wife, formerly Miss Martha Bush, youngest daughter of Col. Jotham Bush of Boylston, Mass., a lady of great personal charm, characterized by Dr. Nelson as "wise, modest, motherly, saintly," whose beautiful old age was lengthened to nearly ninety-five years.

As a teacher Dr. Dickinson is said by Dr. Henry Kendall, a former student, to have had "the faculty of quickly discerning the gifts and mental aptitudes of his pupils, and instead of holding constantly before them some high special model, he encouraged them to do their best in the way most natural." Among others to bear out this witness was Henry Ward Beecher, who personally said to members of Dr. Dickinson's family: "Your father did more for me than any teacher I ever had. He made me work!"

His published writings are chiefly sermons, a number of which appeared in *The National Preacher*. One of them, "The Day of Pentecost," was published in England. Another, entitled "Alarm to Distillers," was widely circulated as a prize tract and is to be found in the volume "Permanent Temperance Documents."

The most noteworthy production of his pen is "The True Doctrines," embodied in the protest of the minority against the excinding acts of the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1837, subsequently adopted by the famous Auburn Convention and ever since known in Presbyterian Church history as the "Auburn Declaration." This statement, pronounced "one of the most remarkable documents of the century" by the late Rev. Dr. Henry A. Nelson, was accepted thirty-one years later by the two Presbyterian Churches, which parted at the very time it was written, as the symbol of their doctrinal harmony when they again became one. Dr. Nelson adds, to justify his assertion: "The self-possession, discrimination, and power of lucid, unambiguous expression which it exhibits are marvelous, especially when we consider all the circumstances in which it was written, amid the intense excitement of the Assembly of 1837." It is pleasant to imagine the profound gratification occasioned by this circumstance to its venerable author, then seventy years of age.

Dr. Dickinson was made an honorary alumnus of Amherst by the conferring of the degree of Doctor in Divinity upon him in 1838. The next year he was chosen moderator of the Presbyterian General Assembly (New School). He had a lifelong interest in Amherst College, to which he sent his two sons, the Rev. Richard Salter Storrs Dickinson, of the class of 1844, and the Rev. William C. Dickinson, D.D., valedictorian of the class of 1848 and for a year after graduation an instructor in the College.

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